



Court Adoption and Permanency Resource Guide

A Handbook for California Courts
Highlighting Adoption and Permanency
Programs



ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
OF THE COURTS

CENTER FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN
& THE COURTS

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Acknowledgments

The project team wishes to acknowledge and thank members of the Judicial Council of California and the Family and Juvenile Law Advisory Committee for their continued attention to issues involving children in the foster care system in California and for their dedication to highlighting Court Adoption and Permanency Month each November with a resolution promoting adoption and permanency solutions for children. In addition, we are also grateful for the resolution in June 2005 supporting the report of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. This formal resolution by the council may help to implement the commission's recommendations while furthering its operational plan. The new California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care will also help provide recommendations to the Judicial Council on the ways in which the courts and their partners can improve permanency for children in foster care.

We would also like to express our gratitude to the California Legislature and Governor for their support over the years in passing similar resolutions in support of Court Adoption and Permanency Month.

We particularly express our admiration and thanks to the superior courts of California that schedule events or otherwise promote Court Adoption and Permanency Month during November or throughout the year. We commemorate all courts, government agencies, nonprofit agencies, and individuals as they strive to reach the goal of adoption or permanency for every child in the foster care system, which should include lifelong connections to caring and committed adults for every child.

In addition, we acknowledge and thank the project team, including Stacey Mangni, Kelly Beck, Audrey Fancy, and Jennifer Walter. We also thank the Editing and Graphics Group and the production team in the Administrative Services Unit for their skills.

Foreword

On behalf of the Judicial Council of California and the Administrative Office of the Courts' Center for Families, Children & the Courts, I am pleased to offer this year's Court Adoption and Permanency Resource Guide for courts to use in preparation for Court Adoption and Permanency Month in California this November. This guide is designed to provide courts in California with ideas and best practice approaches for collaborating with their court and community stakeholders, not only to expedite permanency for children in our foster care system but also to raise our community awareness of the absolute necessity for safe and permanent homes for all foster children.



Over the last several years, California has been an active participant in National Adoption month, which has highlighted the goal of permanency for foster children throughout the nation. In 2005, more than 200 communities in 45 states participated in National Adoption Day, resulting in more than 3,400 completed adoptions from our nation's foster care system.

While the number of foster children in California has declined, the need for permanency remains. Our courts must continue to make permanency a priority for our state's foster children, but they can only successfully accomplish this goal with the help of others. This guide highlights some of the great work that has been done in that regard by many of our California courts over the past few years.

We are very fortunate in California to have a Judicial Council, led by Chief Justice Ronald M. George that supports our courts' efforts to achieve permanency for foster children by both word and action. This guide is only one example of the support that we in California have come to appreciate and expect.

I thank all of you for your wonderful work on behalf of our state's at-risk children and their families, and wish you well in whatever activities you choose to support during this November's Adoption and Permanency Month.

Michael Nash
Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court
Superior Court of California, Los Angeles County
Member of Judicial Council, 2003–2006

Introduction

Adoption and Permanency Guide—Goals and Scope

More than ever before, court system participants must come together to find permanency for every child in foster care. Permanency, as defined by foster care youth, includes having and maintaining a lifelong connection to family members and other caring adults. What is understood as permanency and how to achieve it today reflects this human need to connect and belong. Virtually every child welfare and juvenile justice reform relating to permanency, both nationally and in California, embraces these concepts. One such reform is for the system whenever possible to engage children and their families in all aspects of the decision-making process.

This guide is a compilation of many state and national programs that have been developed and designed to promote permanency for foster care children. Many of the program descriptions and resources found in this guide address the specific challenges to permanency that local courts have identified.

Examples of Court Identified Permanency Challenges

- Finding relatives and other important contacts for the child
- Determining reasonable efforts
- Assessing relatives early
- Engaging youth in decision making
- Participating in concurrent planning
- Resolving disputes through mediation
- Ensuring that long term foster care is not a permanency option
- Recruiting and retaining adoptive parents
- Expediting adoption finalizations
- Making independent living skills meaningful

2005–2006 Permanency Project Judicial Interviews

How to Use This Guide

The guide has been updated this year to include many state and national promising practices and model programs that courts and agencies have used successfully to promote permanency for children, as well as to address identified obstacles to permanency. Many of these programs are collaborative and involve local courts, public and private agencies, CASA, as well as other service providers. The guide has been reorganized to highlight specific themes and programs and to provide an easy reference for each local court system.

We hope you will use this guide to:

- Hold an Adoption Saturday in the month of November.
- Plan and schedule several permanency events throughout the year, such as providing a child with a commemorative item, for example a teddy bear, at the finalization of his or her adoption or setting a time in the morning that will allow anyone wanting to finalize an adoption to take priority on the court calendar.
- Coordinate a working group of practitioners to strategize about how to launch any of the innovative, permanency-based model programs in this guide that are not being used in your local county.
- Convene a stakeholders meeting to develop and bring about complete systemic change in the area of permanency.
- Serve as a resource as issues arise.

Adoption and Permanency Guide Background

The first guide was published and distributed in 1999. Since then, a nationwide effort has been under way to assist courts and other stakeholders in redefining and understanding what permanency means to foster care youth. These efforts were, in part, a result of the Children and Families Service Reviews conducted by the United States Department of Health & Human Services and the passage of Assembly Bill 636, the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act, in 2001.

Both the federal review and the AB 636 efforts in California, among other things, led to our state's focus on improving permanency outcomes for youth. Many of the programs in this guide have evaluation components and have demonstrated their effectiveness in improving permanency outcomes for children.

Materials Provided

I. Resolutions

This section contains a copy of the 2006 Judicial Council Resolution proclaiming November to be Court Adoption and Permanency Month. It includes copies of resolutions and letters of support from the Legislature, Governor Schwarzenegger, and two California counties, as well as advice on passing a resolution in your own court or county.

II. Court Outreach to the Public

This section contains information about programs that the court can use when highlighting either Adoption Month or other displays of permanency-related projects.

III. Court Outreach to the Media

This section contains information to help guide the court and court personnel when dealing with the media, in their effort to bring attention to any permanency, related programs.

IV. Maintaining Birth Family Relationships and Finding Lifelong Connections

This section contains new technological advances in finding family members for youth:

- Additional programs included in this section focus on engaging youth in finding important connections; and
- Strategies are offered for engaging youth in finding permanence

Foster Care Youth Identify the Elements of Their definition of Permanence

- At least one adult
- A safe, stable, and secure parenting relationship
- Love
- Unconditional commitment
- Lifelong support
- Involvement of youth as a participant, perhaps even as a leader, in the process
- Unless the child is not free, a legal arrangement wherever possible
- The opportunity to maintain contact with important persons, including siblings

* Model Programs For Youth Permanency, Meredith J. Lousell, California Permanency for Youth Project

V. Collaborative Permanency Programs

This section contains many programs that focus on engaging both the youths and families in permanency planning. The programs emphasize developing collaborative relationships among youths, families, social workers, and service providers, rather than tolerating adversarial relationships.

Role of Court and Practitioners in Permanency

Court

- Set the statutory mandated time limits
- Inquire about details of reasonable efforts
- Determine paternity at the early stages of the case
- Inquire about search efforts for family members

Practitioners

- Ask the right questions of your clients
- Ensure youth is brought to court, whenever possible
- Listening to youth, rather than a typical “client interview”
- Explain and explore Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) options, when appropriate

VI. Adoptive Families: Training, Recruitment, and Support

This section contains information about collaborating with private agencies to recruit adoptive parents as well as programs designed to help train and support adoptive parents before placement.

VII. Open Adoption for Children in Care

This section outlines information about why open adoption should be made available in certain dependency cases as well as information about how to work with families to develop a post adoption contact agreement.

VIII. Celebrating Adoption Finalizations

This section describes the history of Adoption Saturdays from their beginning in Los Angeles—and their spread throughout the state and the nation—as well as advice and contacts to plan an event in your court.

IX. Web Sites, Trainings, and Other Useful Resources

This section provides a list of Web site addresses to be used to download information and also how to contact specific programs including those that provide training and technical assistance. Resources include court check sheets that are helpful during adoption and permanency hearings as well as several others. Trainings materials include those available from the Center for Families, Children & the Courts and a sample agenda from the annual National Convening on Youth Permanence.

Inside Folder—Resource CD and list of contents: The inside cover contains the original resource binder materials, now on CD-Rom, which was developed by the Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families Children and the Courts, Permanency Project. This CD contains a collection of additional resource materials and programs that relate to permanency.

Strategies that have aided in the success of CPYP permanency model programs

- Involve current and former foster youth to a greater degree
- Put current and former foster youth on your advisory board
- Use current and former foster youth as speakers and trainers
- Hire great staff—don't waste time on those not convinced
- Hire staff who understand the target system
- Spend time on accountability
- Use your resources well
- Keep track of data
- Start small, don't overplan every potential problem, but just try one case
- Build connections with everyone and then use them
- Do public relations all the time; give credit to everyone
- Implement systemwide: It's never enough to just train staff.
- Develop policy and provide administrative leadership

*Model Programs for Youth Permanency; California Permanency for Youth Project, Meredith J. Louisell

Final Notes and Comments

Permanency is everyone's job. As professionals in this system—whose very goal and role is to support and maintain children with their families, if possible, and to ensure that every child has a stable, permanent, and safe home—we should continue to implement strategies that improve permanency outcomes for children.

Permanency is an attainable goal. We can achieve permanency when we work together involving the child and his or her family to develop and implement permanency options. Those options, whether the child is ultimately reunified or adopted, must include lifelong connections as well as sense of belonging.

We hope the program descriptions and resources in this guide will be helpful to you in your work to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care. If you have a local program that you would like to share statewide, we encourage you to describe it on the form at the back of this guide and send it to us; we will include it in future publications.

Thank you.